

PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Adele Z. Silver
Karen Ferguson**Masterworks of Ming and Qing Painting from the Forbidden City**
April 16 - May 21, 1989

Seventy-six of the finest paintings among the 9,000 in the Palace Museum, Beijing, will be on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art from April 16 through May 21, 1989. This special exhibition, **Masterworks of Ming and Qing Painting from the Forbidden City**, is chosen from the treasures of China's last imperial dynasties--the Ming, from 1368 to 1644, and the Qing (pronounced ching), from 1644 to 1911.

During those five centuries, the emperors of China lived and ruled in the Forbidden City, in the heart of old Beijing. Their imperial palace has been a museum since 1925 and now, for the first time, is sending some of its greatest paintings to this country. The exhibition marks the tenth anniversary of official diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China. The paintings have particular significance at the Cleveland Museum, whose collection of Ming and Qing paintings is one of the most distinguished outside China. Cleveland's best Ming and Qing paintings, as well as masterpieces from the earlier Song and Yuan dynasties, are currently on exhibition in the Museum's Asian galleries.

Ming and Qing painters inherited well-established formats, subjects, materials, and techniques. Painting and writing with ink or color on silk went back at least to the 4th century BC, and paper was developed about four centuries later. Favored subjects were birds and flowers, the seasons, portraits, narratives, and landscapes--since the 10th century the greatest achievement of Chinese painting.

During Ming and Qing, paper was more widely used than silk and the dominant formats were the hanging scroll, the handscroll, and the album. Both scroll formats can be rolled up for safe storage, unrolled for viewing. The hanging scroll is the Asian

equivalent of a Western easel painting. The handscroll as a painting format is probably unique to East Asia; it can be unrolled horizontally at the length and pace the viewer chooses to "read" its continuous imagery and follow its rhythms and structure, much as one might follow a musical score. The album format, more like a Western picture book, is less flexible and continuous; its successive images are on separate leaves, though often linked by subject, concept, or inspiration.

Westerners can most directly approach these paintings as visual images that move and delight us, untroubled by complexities of Chinese culture, history, or critical theory. For Western scholars, who will find most of the paintings new and unfamiliar, the exhibition and its catalogue make an original contribution to scholarship.

In China's hierarchical society, even artists were enmeshed in the bureaucratic structure. Some strove for success at court, others avoided the perils of court intrigue. The division between professional/academic painters and scholar/gentlemen painters was real enough--the former worked for temple shrines, rich merchants, and sometimes for the court, while the latter more often withdrew from commissions or declined them altogether--but tensions between the two ways of being an artist in Ming and Qing times should not be exaggerated. Nearly all Chinese artists paid homage to revered masters of earlier times and used those masters' techniques, subjects, and styles. They simply chose different masters to revere and copy.

The early Ming emperors were patrons of professional painters, mostly of the Zhe School, who characteristically made large pictures for palatial homes and official rooms, used bold, vigorous brushwork and great contrasts of ink tones to concentrate on dramatic and expressive action. As the dynasty faltered and chaos engulfed the court, patronage and with it professional production declined. Wu School painters, who generally favored a more restrained painting style than the Zhe, became dominant.

The gentlemen/scholars, many of whom numbered themselves among the Wu, were well educated, especially in literature and poetry, and usually of the prosperous

gentry class. They were the "literati," literary men--in Chinese, wenren. They belonged to the relatively small group of scholars and officials who had mastered calligraphy, the fine art of writing the Chinese language's thousands of complex and subtle characters combining individual brush strokes. Representational painting developed after calligraphy and used its vocabulary, disciplines, techniques, and tools: inks, brushes, and paper, which was receptive to every nuance of ink or brush. Any literati, because of his calligraphic training and experience with brush and ink, could be an artist. For him, brush strokes were a painting's most important element and his "written pictures" were judged by calligraphy's standards: as calligraphy revealed one's character, so did painting. At its most extreme, the wenren position was that selling one's work, or selling it to someone who would not appreciate it, was to compromise one's character, one's very self.

Wu Wei's The Pleasures of Fishing is a spacious view of high, rugged mountains and small fishing boats bobbing in the sea below. In swift, undulating brushwork, it idealizes simple rural life with such immediacy that it seems based on an actual view. That the large hanging scroll by Wu Wei (1459-1508)--one of the eccentric masters of the Ming court--was painted around 1490 but is reminiscent of certain 10th-century paintings suggests some characteristics of all Chinese paintings: they pay tribute to past masters and to tradition; they record beloved and familiar places; and they celebrate close harmony between man and nature.

Shen Zhou's handscroll, The Flavor of Seclusion, treats many of the same elements very differently. Its rocks, trees, water, houses, and boats are direct and brusquely painted, arranged in a composition cut off top and bottom to concentrate our attention on its daring close-up views. This work, probably painted in the early 1480s, draws on an early 10th-century painting style that is insistently understated and closely associated with the art of calligraphy. So is one of Cleveland's finest works by Shen Zhou, the album of scenes of "Tiger Hill," a favorite landmark near Suzhou in

southern China. Shen Zhou (1427-1509), who did not work at court, was the leading wenren master of early Ming and traditionally considered the founder of the Wu School.

Before the Ming Dynasty ended both schools had reached dead ends, one without patrons, the other mired in unadventurous refinement. A literati artist, historian, collector, connoisseur, critic, and master of calligraphy, Dong Qichang (1555-1636), challenged artists to transmit the ancient ideas to future generations through their own individual and original spirits. His powerful work inspired legions of followers. One of his masterpieces is the handscroll in the Cleveland collection, River and Mountains on a Clear Autumn Day. The Palace Museum has generously lent one of his last handscrolls, dated 1635, Clearing After Snow on Mountain Passes.

Among the men who heeded Dong's example were the Four Wangs, linked by family or friendship. Painters who founded what came to be called the Orthodox School, they were the most significant wenren of their generations: Wang Shimin (1592-1680), Wang Jian (1598-1677), Wang Hui (1632-1717), and Wang Yuanqi (1642-1715). The last described the joy that conservative Chinese painters took in their approach to tradition: "...when I play with the pliant brush and enter into and leave the styles of various masters...it is like being face-to-face with the ancients themselves."

Invaders from Manchuria became the Qing emperors. Painting in early Qing times often reflected the alienation of the native Chinese chafing under foreign rule, as many who were loyal, or related, to the Ming rulers withdrew from public life. Yuanji, variously called Daoji (Tao-chi) or Shi Tao (1642-1707), a member of the deposed Ming clan, became a Buddhist monk. His 1671 hanging scroll from the Palace Museum, Plucking Chrysanthemums, and the Cleveland album leaves from his Reminiscences of Qinhuai River, dated about 1700, testify to his lifelong desire to break free from obedience to tradition and to follow his creative impulses, in accord with the teachings of Chan (Zen) Buddhism. His momentous decision to leave the Buddhist

community and live as a secular, professional painter did not change his beliefs. He urged his students to seek their own enlightenment and wrote: "Some think that if they are able to follow the ancients they will become one with the ancients...My creations are my own...How could there be any among the ancients I would study and not transform?"

A contemporary born into a long-established literati family, Mei Qing (1623-1697), created a hanging scroll, Lofty Mountains and Flowing Streams, which is one of the Palace Museum's masterworks. In the quiet center of its powerfully modeled and precariously balanced forms is the contemplative scholar. A more winsome figure appears in Standing Alone on a Lofty Ridge, a swift and summary rendering of a solitary man on a windswept rocky pinnacle. It is like a sketch decisively drawn in gestural strokes. Gao Qipei (1660-1734) painted the handscroll with his fingers, which accounts for its spontaneous and highly personal quality. Though it is unusual for a Chinese painter to turn to an unorthodox fashion for his work, Gao Qipei made finger and fingernail painting a clearly defined and established technique. Much as Chinese culture prizes tradition and continuity, it reserves a special regard for the eccentric.

Western influence made significant inroads during Qing times. The Italian Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), who arrived in Beijing in 1715 and mastered the academic manner of his Chinese colleagues, took the Chinese name of Lang Shining. He used Western concepts of space and shading to paint Chinese subjects with Chinese materials. Tranquil Spring, a hanging scroll that is possibly an unfinished double portrait of the prince who would become emperor and an older attendant shows Western influence in the delicate modeling of faces and Chinese influences in the even lighting, local details, and the folds of ground punctuated with ink "dots." During the last hundred or so years of the Qing Dynasty, a great variety of painting styles emerged, most only now being thoroughly studied by Western scholars.

Masterworks of Ming and Qing Painting from the Forbidden City is organized by the International Arts Council and the Palace Museum, with assistance from Northwest Airlines. The Cleveland showing is assisted by the Ohio Arts Council and by grants for a symposium from The Nord Family Foundation and for various other public programs from the Nordson Corporation. The complete schedule of events (attached) will be available to Museum visitors.

The two-day symposium on Ming and Qing painting, bringing together scholars from the United States, Europe, and China, will take place at the Museum on Saturday, May 6, and Sunday, May 7. The symposium is open to the public; the registration fee is \$20, \$15 for Museum members and students. Details are enclosed.

The catalogue which accompanies the exhibition is available at the Museum Bookstore for \$50 (clothbound), with discounts for Museum members. It includes an essay on Ming and Qing paintings by Sherman Lee, former director of The Cleveland Museum of Art, and entries on each work and its creator--many of them suitable candidates for picaresque or tragic novels--by Howard Rogers, curator of the exhibition and professor of Chinese art history at Sophia University, Tokyo. Stephen Little, associate curator of Chinese art at the Cleveland Museum, who supervises the exhibition here, prepared a gallery guide for all museums to which the show travels, and organized the Cleveland symposium.

Midway through the special exhibition, all handscrolls in both the Palace collection and the Cleveland collection will be rolled to display new sections, and all album leaves will be replaced with comparable paintings.

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